The University of Chicago

SOME INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS OF LUTHER'S NEW TESTAMENT

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1935

By
GEORGE FRIDOLPH HALL

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CHAPTER IV

SOME INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS OF LUTHER'S NEW TESTAMENT

It is difficult to find any phase of Luther which has not been the subject of intensive study and research. The Research Project in the History of Interpretation carried on by the Department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature of the University of Chicago proposed a study of Luther's methods of interpretation. Dr. D. W. Riddle, head of this research project, noted that earlier investigators of this problem followed more or less one pattern, namely the tracing of Luther's development in methods of interpretation. All these scholars used the same materials. All neglected the biblical marginal notes. The prefaces were likewise neglected except the preface to Romans and the data of the prefaces which dealt with Luther's canon. At Dr. Riddle's suggestion the present writer was able to approach the study of Luther's principles and methods of interpretation with fresh materials, not as Luther said it should be interpreted (a favorite theme with the older writers), but as he actually did interpret in the editions of the New Testament. This, then is a source study uncontrolled by the opinions of former writers.

Indispensable for this study was the scientific establishment of the text of these prefaces and marginal notes in the Weimar edition.[1] The sources in many cases were also cited.

The method pursued required classification of the source

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[1] "D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe," Die Deutsche Bibel, Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger: Weimar, Bd. 6 (1929), and Bd. 7 (1931).

materials according to their function. Of secondary interest was the literary types into which pithy comments and prefaces may be classified.

The appreciation of the background of Luther's religious experience is of fundamental importance in the approach to this study. The whole undertaking of translating the Bible, of furnishing prefaces, and supplying marginal notes is best understood in the light of Luther's own experience of salvation in the Word. His early position, that scriptures are superior in authority to the authorities of the church, was to be vindicated only by placing scripture in the language of the day in the hands of the people. But Jerome, Augustine, and many others had burdened scripture with their interpretations. If their approach was followed his work would not avail. It was not enough to place scripture in the hands of the people but a guide must also be given so that they would read the right things in the right way. This is plainly stated by Luther in his preface to the New Testament of 1522.[1]

> Es were wol recht und billich, das dis buch on alle vorrhede unnd frembden namen aussgieng, unnd nur seyn selbs eygen namen und rede furete. Aber die weyl durch manche wilde deuttung und vorrhede, der Christen synn da hyn vertrieben ist, das man schier nit mehr weys, was Euangeli oder gesetz, new oder alt testament, heysse fodert die noddurfft eyn antzeygen und vorrhede zu stellen, da mit der eynfelltige man, aus seynem allten wahn, auff die rechte ban gefuret und unterrichtet werde.

Fundamental to Luther's approach is the realization that all the New Testament books are not equally inspired. Nor was their authority equal. It was not enough that he totally excluded the Gospel of Nicodemus and the letter to Laodicea

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[1]"Vorrhede," W.A.D.B., Bd. 6, pp. 2-11.

(following the text of Erasmus) but he made distinctions within the New Testament itself. The hewbtbucher were the purest Gospel and the essential part of the New Testament. The secondary books were a mixed gospel which spoke of the deeds of Christ rather than his words, which made the mistake of placing love above faith[1] and which in general were quite inferior, though apostolic, to the chief books. In the prefaces to the four books, aptly characterized by Professor E. J. Goodspeed as the "Awkward Squad," which brought up the rear of the New Testament books, he enunciates his standards of canonicity.

Subjectively Luther determined upon this evaluation. The chief books had shown him the way and his spirit fitted in with them. His spirit bore testimony through his experience that they were the Word of God in its purity. Their contents bore witness to the fact that they were inspired. It was the contents, rather than the authorship, which determined the apostolicity of the book. The rogues and villains of Biblical history could be their authors and still they would be apostolic if they Christum treyben.[2] Having determined upon it subjectively as the chief criterion to which all others were subject, he sought to rationalize his evaluation through other standards. The testimony of the church was valuable as to the authenticity of a book, and the evaluation of the ancients was likewise of importance, but these two criteria were decidedly minor compared to the rechte prufesteyn.[3]

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[1]Cf. Marginal note on I Corinthians 13:13.

[2]"Vorrhede auff die Episteln Sanct Jacobi unnd Judas" (1522), W.A.D.B., Bd. 7, p. 384.

[3]Ibid.

Fundamental to Luther's approach was the normative character of the chief books. All scripture must either agree and made to conform with them, or else not be considered as scripture. Hebrews could not agree with Paul even with interpretative devices, James was directly against Paul, Jude had copied Peter, and no one could understand the verborgene, stumme weissagung[1] of Revelation. Acts had the right relationship. It could well be designated as eine glose upon the teachings of Paul, proving with examples what Paul has been teaching with words. The secondary books were not normative but they were good as far as they agreed and established the doctrines of the chief books.

A parallel method was used in determining the Old Testament canon as shown by the prefaces to the apocryphal books.

Four general types of prefaces occur in the New Testament. The propaganda type of preface indicates to the reader what approach he should make to the book. Theological word study is a favorite device. The prominent examples of this type are from the chief books, namely Romans and the preface to the Johannine Epistles. The general preface to the New Testament is also of this type. The remaining prefaces of the chief books, Galatians, Ephesians, and I Peter, are of the digest type.

The digest type of preface gives the outline of contents. Each chapter is taken in order. These prefaces are also highly of the nature of propaganda. All of the secondary books with the exception of Acts (1533) and I Corinthians (Revised preface of 1530), are of this type. The two books mentioned carry

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[1]"Vorrede auf die offenbarung S. Johannis" (1530), W.A.D.B., Bd. 7, p. 408.

prefaces of a definite polemical tone and content.

The apologetic prefaces states Luther's reasons for evaluating some books as he does. These include the prefaces to the books of the "Awkward Squad" and the introductory preface wilchs die rechten und edlisten bucher des newen testaments sind.

Prefaces with a definite polemical note appear in the 1530 and 1533 editions. These include the Vorspruch to the New Testament, the prefaces to I Corinthians and Revelation of 1530 and the preface to Acts in the New Testament of 1533.

Had Luther been content with merely putting the scriptures in the hands of the people, he might well have never translated the Bible for them. Recent researches have dispelled the once current opinion that Luther's Bible was the first German translation to be widely used. The Bible before Luther had a large circulation in German and Latin. Edition after edition was necessary to supply the demand. Not to be forgotten is the widespread use of German and Latin Biblical works such as Psalters, Bible History books, Plenarias, etc. Luther's contribution was not in respect to Bible circulation.

Luther's translation was unique in these respects. It was made from the original language, not the Latin Vulgate. It recognized the fault of the antique versions in that their language was not the spoken language of the day: He anticipated the discoveries of the 19th century that the New Testament was written in the spoken language of its day. His genius lies in the fact that he considered accuracy in translation important but that a translation failed, even though accurate, if it was not smooth, good German. A translation that constantly called attention to the fact that it was a translation had failed miser-

ably.

Although the above represents his ideal, he found that there were certain things a translation could not do. To supply this deficiency he resorted to marginal notes that pertain to the text. It is interesting to observe the several types of notes used. Thirteen and six-tenths per cent of the notes deal directly with language. Of the eighty-five notes devoted to language, forty-eight are definitions of words used in the translation, ten offer synonyms, seven deal with the problem of translation, six give the original language, five explain phrases, three define names, and individual notes deal with such things as spelling, figures of speech, proverbs, and a supposed Hebraism. The latter Luther considered to be the literary device of expressing a positive truth in negative form. Luther's interest in the language note is constant throughout all the editions.

Another thing a translation could not do was to give the scriptural scenery and characters so important for a vivid picture of the book's message. Five and two-tenths per cent of the notes deal with things, and 0.8 per cent with characters. Six of the thirty-three notes devoted to things explain how things are done. Five notes give monetary equivalents. Five notes deal with military and government details. Five concern themselves with current religious beliefs of New Testament times. Three notes are geographical. Two notes give equivalent weights and measurements. The five miscellaneous notes deal with things from trees to food. Five notes explain characters to avoid confusion, to harmonize scriptural accounts, and to give their significance.

In five instances Luther found that the text was a problem.

His dictum that all scripture must agree made some readings impossible. A scribal error is usually supposed where the Greek omits a section found in the Vulgate. Eight-tenths of one per cent of the notes are devoted to this. Three of these notes attempt harmonization of accounts and two are concerned with omissions.

The largest class of notes is the paraphrase group. Twenty-one and five-tenths per cent of the notes or one hundred thirty-five of a total of six hundred twenty-eight are in this classification. This interest, like language, is constant in all editions and all books. Of these notes seventy-seven directly paraphrase the text in idiom or expansion not permitted in the translation. Twenty-two use the device of putting indirect discourse into idiomatic direct discourse. In twelve of these there is a propagandist interpretation. Ten describe the situation, five are slightly polemic, three give popular idioms (too popular for the translation itself), two are aids to Bible study and one states a positive truth negatively.

Another dictum pertaining to the text was that scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. Seven and two-tenths per cent of the notes are of this type. References to the Old Testament are most frequent; fourteen of the forty-five notes are of this kind. Most interesting of these notes is the one on Matthew 1:25 of 1522[ii] where the perpetual virginity of Mary is established by silence of which the silence about the return of the raven to the ark in Genesis 8 is given as a parallel. In nine notes Matthew is referred to for the statements of Jesus, etc. There are eight cross-references within Paul. In seventeen cases Paul is read into all scripture.

Interesting and of a contradictory nature to Luther's levels of inspiration, is the fact that in two cases Hebrews is used to interpret Romans. One of these gives the very passages to which he objected. Six notes compare the Gospels with each other.

The relation between the Old and New Testament is discussed in nine notes. John is read into other books in three instances. There is one instance of a cross-reference in John. Peter is read in one instance and one cross-reference is found in Luke. A total of 11.5 per cent or seventy-two notes are devoted to this sort of thing. It illustrates the dictum of the unity of scripture and that it is self-interpretative. But Luther seems to have forgotten entirely in some instances his evaluation of the books and in other instances he pushes greatly the ideas of the chief books upon their less esteemed fellows. But he is not consistent. Though Hebrews is used to interpret Romans in two instances, yet the figure of milk used in Hebrews is corrected by the same figure used in I Peter. These notes must not be confused with the marginal parallel references.

One hundred fourteen notes or 18.2 per cent are classified as Edification notes. Of these sixty-seven are popular theology, twenty-one are aids to Bible study, sixteen are exhortations for the Christian life, and eleven are devotional. All of these are propaganda for his cause. Twenty notes or 3.2 per cent are directly propaganda fitting in with the propaganda preface furnished for that book (Acts). Of the technical theology type, written in Latin, there are nine instances or 1.5 per cent. This type of note does not appear until the later years of Luther's life when this interest became more dominant with the institutionalizing of his movement. Eight of these notes appear in 1541 and one in

1543. With the exception of two notes, they are found in the 9th chapter of Acts describing the Way of Salvation doctrine from Paul's conversion experience. All of these notes occur in the secondary books.

Even after his break with the allegorical method,[1] Luther continued to use a controlled allegory. Six and seven-tenths per cent or forty-two notes are of this type. Twenty-eight are allegories of the commentator, eleven are allegories of the text, and three are illustrative of spiritualizing otherwise difficult passages. Thirty-seven of these notes appear before 1530. Three of these notes are withdrawn or revised in 1527[11] to exclude the allegorical sections. It is indicative that he was consciously attempting to avoid this method.

But fourteen notes can be directly related to his experience and these only by interpretation. Three can be related to his experience of salvation, two can be attributed to his stand at Worms, two to his frequent attacks of pessimism, eight others to miscellaneous events, i.e., the radicals, the peasant war, his work on the catechisms, his work on the Liberty of the Christian man, etc. Luther sought to keep the personal element in the background.

Fourteen and six-tenths per cent or ninety-two notes are polemical in nature. Contrary to the usual frequency of occurrence that the majority appear in the first edition, the majority of these notes (fifty) were inserted in 1530. Thirty notes are in the first edition. This indicates Luther's growing bitterness to the papacy and his foes. Forty-nine of these notes are directly against the papacy, and nine are directly against the sects.

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[1]"Die sieben Busspsalmen (Erste Bearbeitung)" (1517), W.A., Bd. 1, p. 154; "Zweite bearbeitung" (1525), W.A., Bd. 18, p. 467.

The remaining thirty-four can be attributed to either group. Fifteen are against work righteousness, five are against worldly power, five against the gospel excess, five against the "wise-heads," and individual notes deal with false teachers, contemporary evils, and volcksreligion.

Almost half of the notes (45.5 per cent; two hundred eighty-five out of six hundred twenty-eight) occur in the first edition of 1522. The second edition of that year shows only eleven additions or 1.8 per cent. The 1526 edition adds only two or 0.4 per cent. The edition of 1527[ii] adds eighteen notes or 2.9 per cent. The 1530 edition shows the most general work on the entire contents with the addition of one hundred eighty-eight notes or 29.9 per cent. The 1533 edition adds thirty-two notes or 5.1 per cent. The 1539 edition adds only one note. A general revision took place again in 1541 and seventy-two notes were added or 11.4 per cent. In 1543 four notes were added or 0.6 per cent. In 1545 three notes were added or 0.5 per cent. In the 1546 final edition before Luther's death ten notes or 1.6 per cent were added. The prefaces occur as follows: twenty-one in 1522; three in 1530, two of which are revisions of 1522 prefaces; and one in 1533. One (1522 wilchs die rechten, etc.) occurs as late as 1537 (New Testament Edition) though not in the full Bible of 1534 ff. The great bulk of the work was done in 1522.

It is generally agreed that the notes were written in the margins of the proof sheets and the prefaces prepared in a similar manner. Thus the preface to Romans interrupts the folio numbering in the 1522 edition because it was inserted after the sheets had already been printed. It may be inferred that in this process of adding marginal notes, he came only as far as

II Thessalonians before his time was up for the final presentation of the proof, since only two notes occur after II Thessalonians, namely in Hebrews. It might also be concluded that Luther's intention was to have many more marginal notes because Matthew, the first book, received eighty-four in the first edition. As he went on, he seems to have found less time to accomplish this; it is also true that there were fewer things to comment upon without duplication. But in 1527, 1530, and 1541 the books neglected in the first edition are given their due share. The notes were revised as frequently as the text; this indicates that they were not a haphazard undertaking with Luther but had a definite purpose. The text alone, without the guidance of the notes, would fail in its objective of vindicating Luther's cause.

Not to be overlooked is the parallel between Luther's exegetical work and his biblical interpretative additions. The books which receive the most attention in 1522 are the ones which he had lectured or worked upon in connection with his Wartburg postil. Titus in 1527 reflects lectures of the same year. But most striking is the case of I Peter, Acts, and Revelation. The Preface to I Peter is used as the introduction to his commentary of the following year. Perhaps the commentary influences the influx of notes in 1530. But it must not be forgotten that the notes of 1530 reflect a general movement in all the books.

Revelation in the edition of 1530 reflects directly ideas which had been prominent in his writings since 1520. However, in 1528 several documents came to his attention which were in agreement with his interpretation of the pope as the Antichrist. One of these was Johann Purvey's commentary on Revelation of 1390. Another was an account of a vision seen first by a hermit,

Nikolaus von der Fluhe, who died in 1488. A third was the prophetic booklet of the astrologer, Johann Lichtenberger, which had been newly translated by Stephan Roth in 1527. To the first and last he wrote prefaces, to the vision he wrote an interpretation.

Contemporary events, especially the menace of the Turks, hastened his work in translating Daniel and from the Coburg he issued separately the 38th and 39th chapters of Ezekiel with comments. I Maccabees was interpreted allegorically and the villain of that historical work became the contemporary anti-christ.

Luther's judgments of Revelation then, do not represent a sudden interest, but one of long duration reaching its climax about the time that his biblical preface and interpretative notes appear. It was likewise a sustained interest to the end of his life.

The comments on Acts (1533) were prepared in his own 1530 Bible in connection with a proposed work on de loco iustificationis. The constant additions to John's Gospel are paralleled by his sermons from 1530-41. I Timothy of 1530 reflects lectures of 1528. But some lectures and commentaries are not reflected. The lectures of 1527 and the sermons of 1533 on I John find no apparent response in the marginal notes of that book. His work on the Vater Unsere, the Magnificat, and the Sacrament of the Altar previous to 1522 have no influence on the notes on those passages, for there are none. The influence of later sermons on Matthew, Luke, and I Corinthians is practically nothing. The only thing that can be assumed in this matter is that in some cases Luther's other works affect his biblical notes and

prefaces and in other cases they do not.

In conclusion it may be observed that a total of 53.4 per cent of the notes pertain to the text, 29.6 per cent are propaganda for his cause and doctrines, 14.7 per cent are definitely polemical, and 2.3 per cent reflect his experiences. Of the last class it must be recognized that none of them state specifically that experience. But the emphasis upon the text and its literal meaning, the right approach to scripture, and his bitter polemic are understood only in the light of his salvation and succeeding experiences.